We have come to believe that eyewitness testimonies of the Shoah are exceptionally strong instruments through which we can confront students with both the horrors of the event itself and the potential power of language. Reading the language of those who survived gives us insight into both the profound difficulty of writing and the strong demand to obey the imperative to do so. In part, this is because the ethos of these speakers goes without saying: the language of the testimony and the events that lie behind it are so unimpeachable, and so horrifying, as to render the character of those who survived the crucibleeminently sound. But what happens when, for one reason or another, the ethos of the witness is called into question? This became the case when Daniel Ganzfried, a reporter for a Swiss weekly magazine, found that Binjamin Wilkomirski—the author of the memoir *Fragments: Memoirs of a Wartime Childhood*—may not be who he says he is, and that he may never have been at Auschwitz, as the memoirist claims he was, “except as a tourist.”

Ethos, as a means of securing assent, has traditionally been understood as deriving from the text itself and, to some degree, from external factors such as the speaker’s history or character. Whether ethos is established primarily through the persuasive act or through the audience’s prior knowledge of the speaker’s virtue has been open to speculation from the beginning of the rhetorical tradition. And yet both the intrinsic and extrinsic traditions—what James Baumlin has called the “rhetorical” and the “philosophical” views of ethos—are troubled when confronted with the question of whether the Wilkomirski “memoir” has any worth as a testimony of atrocity. When judged in terms of extrinsic criteria (the philosophical view), the worth of a discourse—regardless of its ability to produce knowledge or to accurately record an event—can always be called into question if we can impeach the character or the veracity of the speaker. In the case of the witness named Binjamin Wilkomirski, it
doesn't matter therefore whether the witness' testimony is effective or indicative of something important. Whatever he has to tell us is tainted because he is a liar. When judged in terms of intrinsic criteria (the rhetorical view), the text seems to agree with or at least corroborate a significant amount of other eyewitness testimony of the Holocaust and thus would seem to be telling a certain truth. It represents a reality to which other witnesses have already testified.1 Faced with the evidence that Wilkomirski is a fraud, however, we need to consider the very real possibility that it was those intrinsic criteria that allowed us to ignore the question of Wilkomirski's identity and that led us astray. His representation—as good as it is—is still false testimony.

Yet, if we define ethos primarily by what I will call an indicative criterion, and see ethos as what resides behind the language of the discourse rather than in the speaker's virtue or in the degree to which the discourse can be squared with a state of affairs, then the extent to which a discourse has an ethical or moral authority—and the extent to which we might say that the speaker or writer is "telling the truth"—depends on the discourse's ability to move an audience to "see" an issue or an event that exceeds language's ability to narrate it. In this essay, I intend to describe an indicative view of ethos, and suggest that it is consistent with much contemporary work on the nature of trauma and the problems of testimony—work that understands testimony as bearing a vexed and sometimes tenuous relationship with the events it tries to tell. As such, an indicative view of ethos puts some pressure on certain conventional notions of what writing can and cannot do, and (at least in the Wilkomirski case) may force us to reassess what does and doesn't count as testimony. In the last section of this essay, I intend to lay out the ethical and pedagogical implications of an indicative view of ethos, both for the Wilkomirski case in particular and for teaching and study of writing more generally. How do we obey the ethical imperative so often attached to pedagogies of the Holocaust—never to forget—if the object of knowledge is something we simply cannot remember, let alone know? The answer is that we cannot. A rhetoric that carries with it an indicative ethos—founded on the knowledge that writing indicates rather than on the knowledge that writing produces—presents us with an impossible ethics: to remember that which we cannot possibly know.

**Ethos and the Wilkomirski Affair**

Ethos has been defined traditionally as the character of the speaker, the extent to which the speaker is able not only to do justice to the object of
discourse (to get it right), but also to adhere to the good, and lead an audience toward the good as he or she does so. The classical rhetorical texts (Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, Cicero's *De Oratore*, Quintilian's *Institutes*) all tend to understand the good as more or less contextually situated, and they all suggest that the integrity of the speech and the integrity of the speaker are intimately related (see Johnson). What this means for someone such as Aristotle is that in the best of circumstances, the speaker hews to the truth of the matter and, in so doing, is more likely to be seen by an audience as someone of good character. Quintilian's "good man speaking well" is essentially a responsible speaker who is knowledgeable not just about the subject, but also about virtue, both in him or herself and in the audience; the best testimony is logically coherent and adheres to the principles of goodness.

The difficulty here, of course, is that principles of virtue are themselves defined by convention: in Aristotle's view, virtue is "a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e., the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it" (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1107a). By Cicero's time, the speaker's virtue is tied almost entirely to the felicity and truth of the discourse itself, "by means of particular types of thought and diction" (*De Oratore* II, xlii, 184). The extent to which the integrity of the discourse could be guaranteed—its ability to make clear the nature of the subject of discourse, and to assure an audience of its "rightness"—is the extent to which the speaker acquired credibility and assent. The speaker is considered virtuous if he or she can lead the audience to mutually acceptable conclusions or actions—that is, actions based in common knowledge or opinion.

But what happens when we learn that a discourse or a testimony whose integrity we had taken for granted and whose author we had no need to question turns out to be a lie? More specifically, what happens when the standing of the author seems to throw into question the validity of the knowledge that the discourse has produced? This is what happened in the Wilkomirski case. In Zurich in early 1994, a literary agent received a copy of the manuscript that would eventually be published as *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood*. It is a memoir, written in the voice of a child, of the author's experiences during the war. Separated from his parents at the age of three, he found himself interned, first in Majdanek and then in another unnamed camp, before he was brought to live in an orphanage in Krakow after the war and, finally, to Switzerland. It is a harrowing account of bewilderment and confusion, murder and
atrocities witnessed by a child who was so young at the time that murder and
disorientation and horror of the camps to the
equally disorienting but normal world of orphanages, foster parents, and
"the ordering logic of grown-ups" (Wilkomirski 4). As in other memoirs,
this one seems to replicate the associations common to involuntary
memory in which a flash of recollection calls up times and places that have
only tangentially to do with the spatio-temporal location that could only
be called the memory's source. The literary agent was so affected by the
manuscript that she sent it almost immediately to Suhrkamp Verlag in
Frankfurt, where it was picked up for publication less than a year later.

Until 1998, *Fragments* stood as an example of the now-familiar genre
of Holocaust memoir, though a profoundly moving and well-written one.
For Daniel Ganzfried, it didn't ring true. He found and then published
evidence that changed the status of the memoir and effectively demol­
ished the ethos of the witness: it was, he said, written by Bruno Dössekker,
a clarinet maker who was born in early 1941 to Yvonne Grosjean, an
unmarried Swiss woman who, along with her brother, was separated from
poor parents as a child. She gave her son up to foster parents, Kurt and
Martha Dössekker, in 1945; and they eventually adopted him twelve years
later. The boy's father had paid toward the cost of his son's care until that
time. In 1981, Dössekker—who now called himself Binjamin Wilkomirski—inherited a small estate after the death of Yvonne
Grosjean. From the 1960s until the publication of the book in 1995,
Dössekker had been obsessed with the Holocaust, and has in his home a
substantial library of memoirs, photographs, and historical accounts of
the atrocities committed against Jews and others during the war. Max
Grosjean, his natural uncle, was found during Ganzfried's research, and
if DNA from a blood sample matches the author's, Ganzfried's case of a
forgery would be proved. Dössekker has so far refused to take such a test. 2

Thus, for much of the reading public, and for many scholars of the
Shoah, *Fragments* is no longer an instance of memory; it is a lie. As one
writer has put it, it now contaminates the Holocaust archive and stands as
a testament to the fraudulent use of the events of the Shoah, a statement
I'll take issue with later (Listoe 5). But even Wilkomirski's staunchest
critics seem to think that something horrifying resides at the center of the
book, though it may not be the events of the Shoah. Elena Lappin provides
one plausible explanation: as a child Dössekker tried on alternate stories
of origin as a way of dealing with the separation from his mother. For
example, one friend recalls that he "used to say that his adoptive parents
wanted him as a medical experiment," and a couple says that he told them in the 1960s that "he had been in the Warsaw Ghetto, and was saved from the Holocaust by a Swiss nanny" (qtd. in Lappin 59). Worse, if his mother's status as Verdingkinder did indeed involve her "sale" as an indentured servant and involved "beatings and sexual abuse," as was often the case, did the child's separation and life as a foster child involve similar horrors? Israel Gutman—himself a Holocaust survivor and a historian of the Shoah—says that "Wilkomirski has written a story which he has experienced deeply, that's for sure" (qtd. in Lappin 61). Although the story may not be true, and though the onus is on Wilkomirski to clear up the controversy, Deborah Dwork said in an interview with the New York Times that Wilkomirski is clearly a deeply scarred man who believes in his identity (see Carvajal). Though the authority of Dossekker, the writer, has been seriously undermined, the book's status as a testament to witness is thus far unimpeached.

One way to explain this divergence is in terms of intrinsic and extrinsic notions of ethos. Particularly if one favors a view of ethos founded on the character of the speaker, then clearly we have in Dossekker a deeply flawed man and, in passing off this fiction as memoir, a seriously unethical act. But what Lappin and Gourevitch note—and what Dwork, Gutman, and many others say in spite of themselves—is that the memoir indicates the site of a trauma (though perhaps not the trauma of the Holocaust) and that the figural intensity of the book is what provides its authority. This latter view is consonant not with the more or less classical notion of ethos founded on Aristotle's person of good sense, virtue, and good will, but on a Platonic sense of ethos. Plato's scheme for rhetoric—though it did not make claims about the character of the speaker as explicit as those made in Aristotle's treatise or in later work by Cicero and Quintilian—nonetheless provides a definition of ethos that depends far more on the effect of a discourse than it does upon its intent, source, or ability to represent a state of affairs. The distinction between an Aristotelian and a Platonic notion of ethos is that the former finds its source in the virtue of the speaker and that it has an effect on the quality of knowledge that the speech produces; the latter finds its source in the speech's ability to indicate (though perhaps not produce) knowledge. To the extent that the speech manages to indicate what lies beyond the contingencies of the world, the speaker may be considered of better or worse character.

In Phaedrus and Gorgias, Plato suggests that language leads speaker and listener to Truth by indicating rather than by producing it. Socrates'
second speech on love figurally represents the cosmology whereby an investment in love and beauty brings souls closer to their point of origin; it does not produce knowledge of that cosmology (*Phaedrus* 244a-257b). But the figural effect of the speech—as well as the object of representation itself, a mnemonic whereby the soul is perfected as it glimpses an object that reminds it of its former perfection—indicates what lies beyond the contingencies of a world in which Socrates imagines the possibility of a state of affairs where he may neither do nor suffer harm (*Gorgias* 469b-c). The orator’s ethos or integrity (as philosopher or rhetor) is higher when he or she indicates this possibility; integrity is lessened when the orator mistakenly believes that reasonable discourse alone may reproduce this possible world. This means that the speaker’s integrity may be in inverse proportion to the degree to which the discourse itself adheres to conventional views of what’s right or historically accurate. The relation between truth as content and what lies beyond truth—what might be called, in psychoanalytic terms, the “real”—is the matter at issue in the debate, late in the *Phaedrus*, on the value of writing. When, in Socrates’ retelling of the myth of the origins of writing, Ammon charges that writing is not a drug for memory but for reminding, he makes a claim similar to the one Socrates makes in his second speech on love about the perfection of the soul: in seeing the beauty of the lover, the soul is reminded of its origin in perfection and is compelled to return there (275a, 249b-e). Writing cannot bring the object of knowledge to the reader, any more than the lover can bring about the perfection of the soul. But writing does (in Socrates’ words) remind the reader of it, though it does not represent the object. In fact, the conundrum for Plato’s Socrates is whether rhetoric produces truth or an image of truth, and most readers of the *Phaedrus* suggest that the best it can do is the latter. What writing (and ideally rhetoric) can do, however, is indicate that which is “really written in the soul”—what lies at the source of language, what lies at its point of origin, to which language does not provide unfettered access (278a).

**Ethos, Testimony, and Trauma**

In Cathy Caruth’s view, it is this origin of language—history as event as it precedes history as a narrative of event—that makes itself present in (and interrupts) the discourse of the witness to a disaster. Caruth isn’t interested in the character of the witness, if by that we mean the authority the witness establishes by dint of his or her character or virtue. In fact, the focus of Caruth’s theoretical investigation of trauma is the victim of “a shocking accident” who “gets away, apparently unharmed,” a person
whose status as speaker is ambiguous at best (16). It is ambiguous because, while the eyewitness to an accident would seem the most reliable source of information about an event, the witness’ access to that event is impeded by its traumatic nature. Caruth explains that “the victim of the [accident] was never fully conscious during the accident itself. . . . The experience of trauma, the fact of latency, would thus seem to consist, not in the forgetting of a reality that can hence never be fully known, but in an inherent latency within the experience itself” (17). The testimony of the victim or the survivor is marked by absences or gaps—often seen in gestures, pauses, fits of anger, or weeping in videotaped testimonies of Holocaust survivor—that interrupt the continuity of the testimony itself, and that stand in the way of understanding the events that pass before the survivor’s eyes as much as (if not more than) they make it present. Caruth’s point is that breaks in the texts indicate the moment that is unavailable in discourse and that is enacted in the unspoken gesture: “writing preserves history precisely within the gap in [the] text” (21). It is a writing that doesn’t refer so much as it leaves, through its repetition, a sense of the event that has been lost.

But the implication of Caruth’s point about trauma is that the relation between what the victim has seen and what the victim is able to say he or she has seen is a tenuous one. Furthermore, it is impossible, in fact, for the victim to render accurately—or maybe even at all—the event that has been survived. If we are to rely on the veracity, if not the virtue, of the speaker in order to establish his or her authority, then it would be extremely difficult to do so in the case of the victim of a trauma. The victim’s testimony is by definition a misrecognition (what is said could not be coequal to what happened) and the speaker’s authority could very easily be challenged. Yet, this is not the position into which we would happily place the Holocaust survivor, though it is exactly the place in which we have placed Dössenker as the author of Fragments. In fact, a number of those who have taken Dössenker’s side in spite of the evidence against him (including Dössenker himself) see those who would undermine his authority as a witness as typical of those who would question the veracity of anyone who claims that the Holocaust took place at all.

But if we understand ethos as deriving from the text’s ability to indicate an event rather than its ability to reproduce it in the name of history—if we see ethos as originating with a speaker on whose soul the event is written, if not one who can articulate it mimetically—then we have to look at the excessive effect of the testimony in order to understand its authority. Furthermore, if Caruth is right—and the events that found
history are only available to us in the gaps or "stutters" in a testimony—then those gaps should be the focus of investigation in the case of *Fragments*. Wilkomirski's memoir is marked by just such stutters, breaks, and impossible juxtapositions of images, images that bear an uncanny resemblance to those visible in the videotaped testimonies of Holocaust survivors. Lawrence Langer has complained that testimony—particularly written testimony—seems to be given over to figural language and that such aestheticization has no place in the literature of witness to the Shoah. But what Langer misses, I think, is the degree to which the displacements inherent in figurative language—particularly metonymy and its variants—reveal an uncanniness that points to the moment of witness, and that provides a way for us to see the origin of the testimony itself. As Saul Friedländer observes, *Fragments* confronts the reader with an uncertainty brought on by the representation of "human beings of the most ordinary kind approaching the state of automata by eliminating any feelings of humanness and of moral sense. . . . Our sense of *Unheimlichkeit* [of the unfamiliar, the unhomely] is indeed triggered by this deep uncertainty as to the "true nature" of the referent of the narrative itself (30).

One of the most horrifying sections of the book is the one in which the boy's hiding place in a women's barracks (along with the hiding places of other children) is found out. Wilkomirski writes that the day is "embedded in sharp contours in my mind, indelibly," but its contours are fragmentary and uncertain:

> I saw pairs of black boots and naked legs running this way and that. Suddenly, the screaming died away into a soft whimpering, the sound of boots slowed down but got more threatening, the noise subsided. . . . I saw the open window opposite. Outside the window, the shapes of men swinging something—weapons or sticks—through the air. . . . Two small, wriggling bundles were pulled out by large hands; the noise got louder again, more yelling from the boots, then a big swing and the bundles flew clear across the room, all spread out in the strangest way as if they were trying to flap their wings, through the window, and out. (101-02)

As indelible as these images are, they are only flashes of images, and inasmuch as we can clearly see what they are intended to convey, there is something else going on. The repetition of references to partial bodies, to the fragments of bodies, begins to have an unnerving effect. What are we seeing here? How is this possible? In marked contrast to the historical work of a Christopher Browning or a Saul Friedländer, what is marked
here is not so much a historical moment or a set of events that can be identified and set down into a larger historical series. Marked instead is a narrative of destruction in which the object of history—the event as it occurred to the witness—is displaced by words and phrases that refer only to its parts, the sum of which, when inscribed in a narrative of testimony, can only break down under the pressure of the event itself.

Caruth’s point is that it is not the traumatic act—the murder of infants or the moment when a child realizes that he no longer has a mother—that is visible in the memoir of a Holocaust survivor. What is visible is the structure of trauma that is made apparent in these painful narratives that try but fail to muster a language capable of making the viewer, the reader, see. Like the indication made possible through writing that Plato recounts in the *Phaedrus*, Wilkomirski’s memoir does not so much call to mind the events, which, if verifiable, could grant authority to the author. Instead, it points to “another reality”: the event as it washes over the memory of the author and stands in the way of the narrative recollection of history. The content of the memoir as a marker of the writer’s authority is tenuous at best. Both Gourevitch and Lappin, for example, found troubling evidence that it is impossible for Wilkomirski to be where he claims to have been. But the excessive effect of the memoir indicates a destruction both of narrative and of consciousness that seems to evidence some terrible event at its source, and it seems to grant an authority to its author in spite of our questions about his status as a survivor of the historical circumstances of the Shoah.

In Caruth’s view, the “victim of [trauma] was never fully conscious during the [event] itself: the person gets away, Freud says, ‘apparently unharmed’” (17). What we read in survivor testimonies is the displacement of the traumatic event (the historical event that is lost to memory) by the language of the testimony—the sometimes broken, sometimes contradictory stories of the camps, or of hiding, or of the aftermath. But it is a language that is disrupted by that event, the language of repetition, in which the event is narrated over and over again but in language that may not be clearly associated with the event at all. What this suggests is that the Wilkomirski memoir—like any memoir (and particularly in the case of traumatic memory)—is a narrative that simply cannot provide us access to the circumstances and the events that are its source, which are precisely the circumstances that could be verified and used to grant the speaker authority: the conventions of history and memory accord with the facts as we know them, and so the writer’s language is all the stronger. But the text’s inaccuracies—and the fact that it is inconsistent and marked by
gaps and plain inaccuracies (or even lies—should not be surprising if we understand Caruth’s point about the language of testimony: the words of the victim “do not simply refer, but, through their repetition...convey the impact of a history precisely as what cannot be grasped” about the event itself (21). The words of the victim do not produce either for him or herself or for the reader or viewer a memory of the event; instead, in Plato’s terms, they act as a reminder of the event as it precedes the survivor’s ability to bring it to language. The problem we are immediately confronted with, however, is that such a view of testimony gives us no way to adjudicate the competing claims of Dösseker and Ganzfried, because to compare the authenticity of the narrative with the facts of history would be to confuse the narrative with the events themselves. If the adoption records provided by the Swiss government are genuine and show that Wilkomirski (or Dösseker) was born in Switzerland, this extrinsic fact does not undermine the speaker’s authority because, as Wilkomirski writes, children who survived the Shoah were often “furnished with false names and often with false papers,” so that they would not be shipped to the east as stateless persons (154). Thus, the matter of history is complicated even further. As for the narrative itself, and its depiction of events that bore it, its gaps cannot be said simply to represent inaccuracies; rather, as Caruth suggests (speaking here of Freud), they represent and preserve “history precisely within this gap in his text” (21). If we are to establish the credibility of the writer, all we have is the text itself and the circumstances of the text’s writing. The text’s effect seems to indicate a moment or an event beyond either the text or the circumstances of its writing.

Ethos, Ethics, and Pedagogy
I want to conclude by briefly drawing out the implications of such an understanding of ethos in the case of Wilkomirski’s memoir, and in the relation between witness and testimony more generally. The first implication is a pedagogical one: how can we obey the imperative to understand the events of the Holocaust if our writing—and our students’ writing—is only able to indicate those events but fails to represent them? The second implication is an ethical one that has to do with claims that Wilkomirski’s text is tantamount to Holocaust denial.

The pedagogical implication of the foregoing is complicated and potentially troubling. Theorists of writing have paid a good deal of attention in the last several years to the ways in which the events of the Holocaust—as rendered in fiction and in testimonial accounts—can be
seen as points of departure for discussions of diversity, or race hatred, or the role of resistance, or any number of other controversial topics. The assumption we generally make in courses like these is that their goal should be the production of knowledge of the events of the Shoah and that, whenever possible, they should connect that knowledge with other knowledges—of the dynamics of poverty, or of racism, or of other disasters or genocides. But while there is clear documentary evidence available to substantiate many of the details surrounding the events of the Shoah, and though there is enough testimonial evidence to suggest to us the experiences of individuals involved in the events, that evidence cannot bring knowledge into accord with the events themselves. I've seen this time and time again in writing classes focused on the Holocaust: faced with the enormity of the events as described in halting, incomplete and yet horrifying testimonies and documents, students have a very difficult time evaluating that writing, let alone trying to find language with which to write themselves. How can you possibly assess the authority of the sources you read, and the character of the witnesses who have written them, when you are absolutely shattered by their effect?

Andrea Freud Loewenstein provides one example of this pedagogical problem. She writes that her introduction of Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* in a second-semester writing course at Medgar Evers College produced some startling reactions from students. In addition to seeing the book—a depiction, in comic book form, of Art Spiegelman’s collection of testimonies of his father’s survival of the Holocaust in Poland—as a writing prompt for her students, she also saw the book as an opportunity to “challenge the anti-Semitism I heard from my students,” and to “think more widely about the origins and effects of stereotypes and prejudice, to see themselves not only as victims of stereotyping and prejudice, but also as perpetrators” (419). The account of the class includes transcripts of her students’ conversations and some excerpts from their writing, writing that seems to indicate a desire to come to conclusions about the subject of the Shoah and of their experiences but that falls short of the mark for various reasons, one of which may be the pressure—the disaster—of the circumstances of the writing itself.

Loewenstein’s postscript points to the greater difficulty of seeing a relation between the events of history—in this case, Spiegelman’s attempt to work through his father’s experiences in the camps and his own very difficult experiences as the son of a Holocaust survivor—and the writing of those events into a narrative of history or of experience. In her postscript, Loewenstein tells her readers that one of her colleagues at
Medgar Evers drew her aside to show her a paper in which a student had "really made a leap forward in understanding," a paper in which the student (who had been in Loewenstein's class a year earlier) had lifted sections of a paper from the earlier class and placed them in a paper for the second instructor's course on an altogether different subject. Loewenstein provides two possible reasons for this: the student was pleased with her insight and "merely decided to recycle it"; or, it was a "cynical exercise in giving [the second] teacher what she wanted" (419). But there is another more fundamental explanation: the student's sense of the material from Loewenstein's class and her ability to record that sense in conventional terms are irremediably divided by the passage of the events of the class from event to experience. Loewenstein, like most teachers, is willing to see her student's writing as a faithful record of an insight or understanding—of learning—that came to the student in class. To have placed a passage from that writing in an essay for a different class is tantamount to recycling the insight. This interpretation misses the point, however: at best, writing is indicative of events—or, in this case, of ideas—that precede the writing itself, and the student may well have seen the recycled passage as bearing the imprint of an event or experience that could not otherwise be narrated. The passage, in other words, may be related both to the "leap forward in understanding," experienced in the second class, as well as to the insight gained in the first, but it is a relation that can only be surmised.

To press the point further, I want to suggest that the student's writing perhaps substitutes a conventional knowledge for a more traumatic, complicated, and unwritable sense that is impossible to know except as a moment that precedes language altogether. The passage, in part, reads,

We were both [Blacks and Jews] packed like sardines and sent away from our homelands, the Jews by trains and the Blacks by boat. . . . [T]he German solution for the Jews was total destruction; the White solution for the Blacks was total utilization. . . . Unlike the Jews, Blacks were considered more useful alive then [sic] dead. Now whenever I pass the intersection of New York Ave and Eastern Parkway I can observe the Jews with new insight, comprehension and realization of our common experience. (Loewenstein 411)

Although the student expresses a sense of her "common experience" as an African American student with those of Jews during the Holocaust, her conclusion is an attempt to forge a knowledge from her particular and very difficult position in the midst of an experience that she is at pains to
fully understand. What she has written, in other words, responds to the disciplinary demands of the writing course: she’s trying hard to get it right. But there seems to be some other event, some other insight, that functions as the origin of this narrative; it should come as no surprise to Loewenstein therefore that the narrative could be used as an indication of something that she herself may not be able to recognize. The student’s ethos—the authority that could be granted by her authentic connection to the events she describes—is here open to question. But the relation between the writing and what it indicates is not.

As for the ethical implication: what if—as Ganzfried, Raul Hilberg, and others claim—Dössekker’s “memories” and the trauma that he so clearly seems to have experienced are patently false? This is all the more disturbing if it leads, as Philipp Blom has suggested, to an erosion of “the very ground on which remembrance can be built” and leads eventually, as Harvey Peskin suggests, to “a new revisionism that no longer attacks the truth of the Holocaust itself but only individual claims of survival” (38). Does the ambivalent relation of extrinsic and intrinsic authority—the difficulties inherent in writing an event and the elusiveness of the event itself—allow for such a radical reading of the Wilkomirski memoir?

It is, in fact, entirely consistent with an indicative theory of ethos that the nature of events rendered in discourse can only be established individually: it is impossible to understand whether or not “the Holocaust” occurred in all of its horrible detail because any rendering of the event—either through eyewitness testimony or with the broad brushes of history or panoramic films—risks giving us the mistaken impression that what we hear or see in the testimony is what the eyewitness saw, or that the individual narrative can act as a substitute for the larger historical narrative. This was a point made over and over again during the debates that followed the release of Schindler’s List in 1994. Critics complained either that the film was too brutal in its use of detail in sequences that, for example, depicted the liquidation of the Krakow Ghetto and especially those sequences that involved the showers at Auschwitz; or they complained that the film wasn’t detailed enough, and that even the violence of the liquidation scene omitted atrocities that would have given the film a greater historical authority. Reviewers in a roundtable discussion printed in the Village Voice in March of 1994 worried that the American viewing public would equate the movie with the event, and conclude that, in the end, it wasn’t all so terrible (see Hoberman). What was remarkable about that roundtable discussion—and about nearly every discussion that took place after the film’s premiere—is that every participant in the
debate "saw" something quite different in the film. This is partly due to the nature of taste—as Kant pointed out so clearly over two hundred years ago. But it is also partly due to the nature of the rhetorical enterprise—that is, according to at least one reading (and, I hope, not an idiosyncratic one).

We live in a thoroughly rhetorical world in which we do not establish truth through discourse as much as we produce arguments for a certain view of it; no argument—no matter how strong and no matter the integrity of the speaker—will settle a matter once and for all. Arguments produce contingent truths that can be tested later for consistency, but that consistency then has to be established through another argument, and we go through the process all over again. In such a world, there are few guarantees that what is understood in one "conversation"—or, for our purposes here, testimony—will be understood the same way in another or by different witnesses to the testimony. This view of the rhetorical enterprise is not new: in the Phaedrus, Plato’s Socrates is at pains to show that, ideally, writing is indicative of what lies behind knowledge rather than what is productive of knowledge. The successful rhetor is the one who is able to convince an audience not that what he or she says is true, but that what he or she says, while untrue, has an effect that points to what occupies a place outside of language. And this effect—writing as a reminder of what was once inherent in the soul but is now inaccessible to it—is a radically individual one, an effect that is different from soul to soul, from listener to listener, from witness to witness (Phaedrus 277e-278a).

To return now to Blom’s worry that the Wilkomirski narrative introduces a new sort of Holocaust denial that questions not the occurrence of the event but individual testimonies which, taken together, might testify to it, he is right to be concerned. He is right to say that if we can undermine the authority of the writer of a Holocaust testimony, and say with certainty that he was never there and that he did not see what he claims to have seen, we have eliminated one piece of evidence that we can use to argue that the atrocities of the Shoah occurred. Taken together, such testimonies—in the form of eyewitness accounts, documentary evidence, trial transcripts, and diaries—form the tapestry of suffering that we have inherited as the narrative of the Holocaust. But such testimonies—as accounts of traumatic events that are inaccessible even to the memories of those who survived, let alone those who claim to have done so or those who read their accounts—function in similar ways and have similar effects: they establish the credibility of the speaker, and indicate an event as it occurs prior to the speaker’s ability to speak it, not so much in
accordance with the facts of history (facts that are accessible only through narrative) but in the way they disrupt the narrative of history and force the reader, or the interviewer, to see something horrible, perhaps a trace of the traumatic event itself. These effects are only available to one witness, one reader, at a time.

In the case of the Wilkomirski memoir, we may well be able to undermine the authority of the speaker if we take him to be trying to establish a narrative of the circumstances of the Holocaust that will settle the matter once and for all. The converse is also true: his lack of credibility does seem to throw open to question the veracity of testimonies of other survivors. But this is not to say that it lessens the traumatic effect of the testimony, or the testimony's ability to indicate something about the nature of the disaster, though that disaster may not be the historical events that we call the Shoah. Lappin suggests that Dössékker has indeed suffered some shocking accident in the events surrounding his separation from his mother, or the years in which he lived in orphanages, in foster care, or in the care of adoptive parents. Such an event renders the uncanny effect of the memoir's language as an indication of an event that is not only inaccessible to his readers but inaccessible to himself as well. As I said above, Blom has reason to worry about the effect of Wilkomirski's credibility. But, to a different degree, he should also worry about the same issue in each and every survivor testimony; doing so will teach us a good deal about the events that found them.

**Conclusion**

The Wilkomirski memoir—like any attempt to write an event that one has experienced or imagines he or she has experienced—is a narrative that simply cannot provide us access to the circumstances that lie at its source, though it may or may not accord with the historical record. That an account is inaccurate, or that it is inconsistent and marked by gaps and plain inaccuracies (or even lies), should not be surprising—that is, from the perspective offered by an indicative understanding of ethos. It is only in the obliteration of events that the writer is brought to language and is able to indicate them, if only indirectly. The language to which the writer is brought does not necessarily adhere to what we think of as the historically accurate, or the verifiable, or even the circumstances of the writer. But this is a troubling fact about history and memory that gives us no way to adjudicate the traumatic experiences we read in memoirs such as Dössékker's. The gaps in a narrative cannot be said simply to represent inaccuracies. Rather, as Caruth suggests (speaking here of Freud), they
represent and preserve "history precisely within this gap in his text" (21). What we are left with is the possibility that the gap between the historical record of the irretrievable event and the rhetorical memory built to fill it can never be closed.

The effect of a discourse, of a testimony, cannot function as evidence of the authority or veracity of the witness, if by that we mean "getting it right." But if we take seriously the idea that the ethos of the witness is established through an ability to indicate the event as it exceeds our ability to write or name it, then perhaps the goal of writing courses that account for the events of the Holocaust should not be to produce knowledge—either through analysis of documents, testimonies, and literature, or through the production of essays linking anti-Semitism to contemporary racism—but to indicate the elusiveness of the traumatic experience that, in some cases, can only be indicated by written language. If Caruth is right about the nature of trauma, then it should be no surprise that evaluating the effectiveness of a witness' account of the horrors of the camps and evaluating the veracity of the account point in two conflicting directions. And although it's plausible that Dössékker is a charlatan, it's also plausible that the testimony he provides of the experience of a child by the name of Binjamin Wilkomirski is a narrative account of a trauma to which he has no access but whose effect is visible in the indicative effect of its language.

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Notes

1. See O'Keefe, particularly the chapter, "Source Factors," for a description of how this problem is treated in psychology and communication research. For views more consistent with contemporary critical and historiographical theory, see Ginzburg and Jay on the problems of verifiability of witnesses in the case of disasters such as the Shoah.

2. For accounts of the Wilkomirski affair, see Gourevitch; Lappin.

3. See Langer, especially 39-76; for an alternative view, see Bernard-Donals and Glejzer.

Works Cited

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